

• Case report •

Case report of *Folie à Trois*

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Summary: A 50-year-old factory worker was admitted to hospital following an altercation with fellow workers. He reported a 25-year history of grandiose delusions related to being a special agent for the Taiwanese and US governments (for which he had been paid 100 million dollars) and paranoid delusions related to persecution by China's national security agencies. After detailed assessment by several specialists he was diagnosed as having paranoid schizophrenia. His 48-year-old wife stated that his reports of working as a secret agent were true and that she herself was under scrutiny by the security forces. His 26-year-old son (who was unmarried and still lived with his parents) reported that his father was a 'Great Man' with special abilities who was unfairly persecuted and stated that he, too, had been secretly followed. The delusions reported by the wife and son were judged to be induced by those of the patient and so this was determined to be a case of *Folie à Trois*. After one week of treatment with risperidone – which did not influence the patient's delusional system – he was removed from hospital by his wife and stopped treatment. Three months later the three family members continued to believe that the reported events were true.

1. Case presentation

1.1 Index case

A 50-year old male factory worker was admitted to the Shanghai Jiading Mental Health Center with a 25-year history of grandiose and persecutory delusions. The current admission was precipitated by a physical fight with his fellow workers who he believed were bullying him. The local police were called and they brought the patient and his wife to the psychiatric hospital for evaluation. Based on the patient's own report and that of his wife, starting in 1988 (when he was 25 years old) he became convinced he was an internationally renowned secret agent who had: a) changed global military thinking when he was 8 years old; b) communicated with Taiwanese spies when he was 17; c) used his mental powers to direct American military forces; and d) (more recently) single-handedly coordinated the liberation of Kuwait. The Intelligence Agency in Taiwan and the US Central Intelligence Agency had been secretly protecting him and had made monthly payments into his account at the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, which now totaled over 100 million US dollars. The Ministry of State Security of the People's Republic of China had contacted him on many occasions with the goal of acquiring his advanced military intelligence, but he refused to provide

this information so they persecuted him and his family in a variety of ways: his application to build a house in 2007 was denied by local authorities; the government had made it difficult for him, his wife and his son to find good jobs; and his co-workers hampered his activities at work and even poisoned his food. Over the years he had frequently moved from job to job. He reported that he had been working normally at his current workplace for several months, though he had recently made several complaints to his superiors about unfair treatment.

There was no history of prior psychiatric treatment and no family history of mental disorders. Physical examination and routine laboratory tests were normal. On mental status examination the patient was conscious, fully oriented to time and place, able to communicate normally, and appeared of normal intelligence. There were no obvious hallucinations or perceptual distortions. His mood was stable but his emotional reactions were somewhat inappropriate to the content of his speech and to the surrounding environment. His thinking was slightly disorganized but he was fully coherent. He had extensive grandiose and persecutory delusions about which he had no insight.

After consultation with several experts he was given a diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia.

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1.2 Induced cases

The patient's wife was a 48-year-old dishwasher with a primary school education. She married her husband in 1986 and gave birth to their son the following year. She believed that her husband was a noble man with extraordinary talent who had participated in the military planning for the Kuwaiti war. She thought that her family was being treated unfairly, so she acted cautiously and tried to avoid socializing with others. She believed that due to her husband's activities the Shanghai Police and the national security apparatus were watching and following her, and that there were undercover police around her work place. She did not believe that her husband had a mental illness.

The patient's son was a 26-year-old factory worker with a middle school education who came to the hospital two days after his father's admission. He was unmarried and still lived with his parents. He reported that from childhood onwards he knew about his father's outstanding achievements and stated that everything his father said was true. He reported several episodes in which he sensed being followed and protected by mysterious people on his way home from school. When in middle school, he found that someone had used his name to fraudulently pose as a VIP, but the person stopped after being warned. The son was actively involved in his father's petition in 2007 to build a house and considered his and his family's rights had been violated, so he had made a petition about this to a Japanese news agency in Shanghai, the 'Asahi Shimbun Digital'. He firmly believed that his father was treated unfairly at work and that there were issues with his father's food at work. He thought that the fight at work was understandable because co-workers had made trouble.

1.3 Treatment and follow-up

During the first week after admission, medical staff observed his behavior closely and inquired more about the details of his daily life and work but did not treat him with any medication. After the diagnosis was confirmed by experts, he was treated with risperidone (2 mg/d). He was discharged one week later (2 weeks after admission) because his wife and son did not believe that he had a mental illness that required treatment. His delusions were unchanged at the time of discharge. He stopped the medication on discharge and followed his employer's recommendation to stay at home and 'rest'. He went to a local branch of the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China to claim the 100 million US dollars from the US government, but the bank denied the existence of these funds. His wife and son continued to work at their regular employment and persisted in their belief that he was a Great Man who was being unjustly persecuted. Three months after discharge, the patient was still staying at home. The relationships

within the three-person household were good, though they were not willing to have much contact with others.

2. Discussion

Induced psychosis is a rare delusional disorder in which two or more people share the same delusions due to close emotional ties (e.g., mother and daughter, sisters, spouses, teacher and student, etc.). One of the persons actually has a psychotic disorder and the delusions of the other person are the result of induction.^[1,2] Lasegue and Falret first documented *folie à deux* in 1877,^[2,3] in which there is a single associate of the psychotic individual who has induced delusions. There have been rare cases in which more than one associate of the psychotic individual has induced delusions: *folie à trois* (two persons have induced delusions) and *folie à quatre* (three persons have induced delusions).

Key points in the diagnosis of induced psychosis include the following: a) the induced cases have similar delusions to those of a close associate who has already had delusional psychosis prior to the onset of the induced cases; b) the induced cases and the individual with delusional psychosis live in a relatively closed environment (typically a family) with little socialization with outsiders; c) there is empathy between the original (index) case and the induced cases; d) the original case is an authority figure and the induced cases have dependent and obedient personality traits; and e) delusion is the major clinical presentation.^[4]

The current case report is an example of *folie à trois* ('3-way induced psychosis'). The original case was a 50-year-old male, and the induced cases were his wife and son. Supporting evidence for the diagnosis of induced psychosis include the following: a) the original case and the two induced cases had similar persecutory delusions and the two induced cases completely believed (to a delusional degree) the grandiose delusions of the original case; b) the induced delusions occurred following the onset of delusional psychosis in the original case; c) the emotional relationships in the family between the original and induced cases was good; d) the original case was an authority figure in the family; e) the wife, who may have had below-average intelligence, was emotionally dependent on her husband (the index case) and the son, who was 1 year old when his father's delusional psychosis started, was full of respect for his father; and f) the family had limited interaction with others in the community.

The key to the treatment of induced psychosis is the immediate separation of the secondary cases from the original case. The original case needs appropriate psychological and psychopharmacological treatment. Secondary cases can be given counseling and psychotherapy as needed. Usually symptoms of the secondary cases spontaneously resolve as the symptoms disappear in the original case. In this case, the original

case and the secondary cases were not willing to accept treatment so their delusional world will be sustained. Community doctors will continue to monitor the family in the hopes that an opportunity for actively intervening presents itself.

Acknowledgment

The patient, his wife and son all provided written informed consent to publish this case report on his condition.

Conflict of interest

The authors report no conflict of interest related to this case report.



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